Forensic Panelists Hit Inquiry on Assassination

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CHICAGO—A retrospective look at the medicolegal aspects of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy brings into focus a major weakness in the specialty of forensic science, the new president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences said here.

Those active in the forensic sciences, Jack L. Sachs pointed out, have been "teaching and educating each other" but have neglected to bring to outsiders an understanding of the purposes of this multidisciplinary group of specialists.

Mr. Sachs, a Chicago attorney, urged educational measures to remedy this "burying of our heads in the sand" and to make the public aware that coroner's offices should make use of good medicolegal autopsies performed by pathologists, forensically trained if possible.

Panelists at the academy's annual meeting cited examples of errors in judgment, some on the part of physicians, that were made because of an apparent lack of understanding of forensic problems from the time President Kennedy was shot to the issuance of the Warren Commission report.

Medical Aspects Criticized

Medical aspects of the Warren Commission report came in for the greatest share of criticism, with other alleged defects including lost documents, incomplete investigation and jurisdictional disputes also pointed out. Commenting from the panel or the audience were members of the academy, which includes pathologists, psychiatrists, toxicologists, coroners, lawyers, and specialists in criminalistics and questioned documents.

Despite the fact that "the acknowledged leaders in the forensic fields in the world" are in the Academy of Forensic Sciences, it was not called into the Lee Harvey Oswald case, Mr. Sachs said. The reason for the omission, he said, might be traced to the academy's lack of identification with "its very reason for existence"—the health, education, and welfare of the public.

The clinicians, who performed well in attempting to save the life of President Kennedy at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Tex., erred in not spending two minutes in a cursory examination of the surface of the body after death, said Dr. Cyril H. Wecht of Pittsburgh, who was formerly attached to the coroner's office in that city.

Such brief examination, he said, might have been helpful in view of the tremendous number of questions and speculations that ensued, from the press and the public, regarding the number of shots and the possibility of an organized insurrection. He also suggested that it had been unwise for the attending physicians to immediately make public comment that there was uncertainty regarding the directions from which the bullets had entered the body, since these statements created apprehension.

Dr. Wecht declared that it was surprising that the pathologists at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., did not first get information from the attending physicians at Parkland before making the autopsy. He said that the pathologists were also handicapped in making complete studies by the fact that the bloodstained suit and shirt of Governor John B. Connally of Texas were first cleaned and pressed before reaching them.

He observed that one of the purposes of the examination of the body was to help allay any misapprehensions on the part of the public, yet it was made solely by pathologists from the armed services. The calling in of at least one recognized civilian pathologist, of which there were a number in Washington, would have been wise, he said, in view of the not uncommon suspicion by Americans of opinions exclusively by "governmental officials."

Noting that the attending physicians at Parkland had to type the President's blood, Dr. Wecht said it would have seemed logical that someone close to the President at all times should have had this information.

Autopsy Report Unnecessary

He declared it his personal opinion that the "quibbling" over the lack of a postmortem report on the state of President Kennedy's adrenal glands—to disprove or prove earlier claims that he had Addison's disease—was unnecessary. The answers would not have saved the President's life nor aided the investigation, Dr. Wecht said.

"The Warren Commission, a body of outstanding attorneys, appeared to follow that practice—common to a group of intellectuals—of functioning as lay psychiatrists," it was charged by Dr. Meier J. Tuchler of Phoenix, a psychiatric consultant to the Arizona State Health Department.

He said he was "astonished to learn that of the 552 witnesses interviewed or deposed and over 25,000 reports presented to the commission, no psychiatrist studied any data gathered by the formal and official sources or by the investigators and attorneys for the commission."

The commission, he said, hired two historians but no psychiatrists. It heard only two psychiatrist witnesses, one of whom saw Oswald last when the latter was 13, the other of whom saw only Jack Ruby.

The report is deficient in establishing motive, Dr. Tuchler concluded.

Jay Schwartz, a Kenosha, Wis., attorney formerly attached to that state's Attorney General's Office, noted "the unfortunate conduct" of a spokesman for the Dallas bar, "who pronounced Oswald retrial to the world press."

Lawyers Not Psychiatrists

"It must be understood that as many lawyers believe themselves to be psychiatrists as there are doctors who believe themselves to be lawyers," Mr. Schwartz remarked.

The Kenosha attorney also said that the conclusion that Oswald fired all the shots was based "solely on the pathologists at Bethesda. . . ." and is subject to question.

"The commission found that there were between two and six shots fired," Mr. Schwartz said. "The best guess of the commission is three shots, based upon the proposition that there were three spent cartridges found at the Book Depository. It claims that one shot missed and one [the nonfatal] shot ran through the President's shoulder, through his neck, through Governor Connally's back, chest, wrist and thigh. No witness . . . believes that."

He said that the Parkland Hospital notes are probably the only original notes still in existence," others having been destroyed or not having been made in the first place during the interrogation of Oswald. Corroboration for the pathology reports, he added, might have been possible, but "pictures and x-rays given to the White House physician and Secret Service, many of them undeveloped, were never seen by the commission."

James W. Osterburg, a Bloomington, Ind., criminalistics expert, called the event the "most demanding homicide investigation ever undertaken" and said that there are "some areas in which the basic research necessary for the objective evaluation of evidence has yet to be performed."

Future's Wrongful Death

MEDICAL MEETING